

Timor-Leste

Playing the Man in Timor-Leste

The recent violence in Timor-Leste has been blamed on former prime minister Mari Alkatiri or on political opportunists. **KYM HOLTHOUSE** reveals a more complex picture.

Much of the discussion around the recent violence in Timor-Leste, whether in the mainstream media, academic or activist circles, has tended to take the form of a polarised debate spinning on the question of whether the ruling party, Fretilin, and Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri were victims or villains in the crisis. This simplification has produced a lot of 'heat' between anti- and pro-Fretilin camps, but has contributed little to a deeper understanding of the conflict and its relationship to a post-conflict state-building environment.

Much of the media reporting either implied or directly stated that resolving the crisis was as simple as removing Alkatiri from office. Now that this has happened, and a semblance of stability has returned, it remains to be seen whether Fretilin, the government and the country can re-unite around a non-party leader in interim Prime Minister, Jose Ramos Horta.

The majority of media criticism on Alkatiri has focused more on his Marxist background and his aloof and highly centralised leadership style rather than attempting either to unpack the antagonism towards him in Timor-Leste, or offer serious critiques of his policies assessed against the many constraints any East Timorese leader would face.

If true, the allegations against Alkatiri of knowingly permitting one of his ministers to supply firearms to civilians are obviously a far more serious category of criticism. However, even if ultimately proven, the media treatment of Alkatiri's role, and to a lesser extent dismissed Interior Minister Rogerio Lobato (arrested and under investigation for supplying weapons to civilians), overlooks more important questions of why figures such as Alkatiri and Lobato emerged as post-independence leaders if their political legitimacy was so weak.

The reduction of Timor-Leste's political problems to its now-deposed leader led conservative commentators such as *The Australian's* Greg Sheridan and UNSW/ADFA academic James Cotton to conclude disturbingly that Australia, as Timor-Leste's 'security guarantor', must exert greater influence in determining East Timorese political leaders. Cotton

even argued that non-engagement would be preferable to engagement without such influence. Not surprisingly, this line of reasoning has fuelled conspiracy theories on the left of active Australian involvement in engineering a *coup d'état*.

Given Australia's historical record in relation to Timor-Leste it is well that government policies, stated and unstated, are closely scrutinised. But on balance the conspiracy theories do not stack up. The current talk of 'failed states' in vogue with security policy-makers has grown out of the primary goal of promoting stability. That Australian engagement has not produced this does not change the desired outcome.

Furthermore, explaining Timor-Leste's political problems primarily by recourse to external forces works to obscure the agency of East Timorese actors in the political life of their country. Protagonists are reduced to 'victims' or 'puppets', and we still do not know what motivates them.

Reducing the problem to Alkatiri, on the other hand, says nothing about Timor-Leste's challenge of creating a modern state that can accommodate, and be accommodated by, persistent traditional political structures. This is not to say that the individual is not important: Mari Alkatiri's political legitimacy is certainly affected by who he is. The fact that he spent the occupation in exile in Mozambique; that he emphasises the Portuguese aspects of Timorese identity; that he is a secular Muslim of half-Yemeni extraction in a Catholic country where origins are important: all these facts are prominent in local discourses among Alkatiri's detractors.

But perhaps most significantly from the viewpoint of state-building, Alkatiri embodies legalistic, technocratic knowledge, making him instantly recognisable as a potential leader according to notions of modern statehood, but less so to many of his own people. This is really a problem of state-building, rather than individuals.

The response by many on the Australian left to either locate the roots of the crisis outside the country or collectively characterise a wide array of internal sources of opposition as 'political opportunists', reflects that Timor-Leste's process of

political adjustment to independence needs to be mirrored by parallel processes of adjustment in foreign activist circles. Much of the writing suggests a default position of solidarity with Fretilin that was essential during the struggle for independence but now reduces much-needed space for open and critical discussion.

Under Indonesian occupation, there was never any question that ultimate responsibility for violent crimes committed by Indonesian military, police and militia lay with the Indonesian government, through its policy of occupation. As a result, state violence knitted easily with the demands for independence. The current era's complexity means it is far more problematic to engage critically with the relationship between the state and security.

This new complexity is reflected in reactions to persistent police brutality by the Timor-Leste National Police (PNTL). Although the brutality is reported by Amnesty International

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and carried by the press, reactions are more muted for the lack of a clear political framework through which to understand it. Missing also from much commentary on the crisis from the left has been discussion of the state violence enacted at the outer Dili suburb of Taci Tolu on 28 April, where Timor-Leste Defence Force (F-FDTL) soldiers opened fire on demonstrators, killing at least five people. The use of the military for internal security should raise alarm bells, particularly as the prime minister had deployed the F-FDTL without consulting the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, President Xanana Gusmao, who was later denied access to the site by F-FDTL soldiers.

Deep suspicion surrounding the official death toll was widespread in Dili before violence broke out again in May, but irrespective of the actual number, the key point is that lack of government transparency damaged community trust in both the government and the F-FDTL. It also served as the trigger that prompted Alfredo Reinado, a military police commander, to abscond from his post, one week later, with weapons and around twenty men, framing his desertion as a protest at not being allowed to perform his role of military oversight.

One of the after-effects of Timor-Leste's nationalist war of liberation is that actors routinely make claims to political legitimacy through the prism of the nation. In effect, the degree of sacrifice during the independence struggle becomes the primary determinant of one's closeness to the nation. Other aspects of identity, such as genealogy, language, party ties, and religion also acquire meaning in terms of how they position people relative to the nation.

These claims to the nation heavily inform contests to control, participate in and be recognised by the state — contests which are further complicated by intersection with an entirely different set of legitimating criteria relating to the knowledge types, skill sets, and political structures required to construct a modern democratic state. The contradictions created at these intersections help to sustain a volatile politics of identity, which is central to the main lines of conflict.

Whereas Fretilin was previously seen, and saw itself, as the bearer of the nation, its post-independence role requires it to compete within a pluralist political environment while still governing for all and maintaining national unity.

Confronting this new reality, Fretilin has borrowed heavily against its history and national imagery to strengthen its legitimacy. This can be seen in the meshing of party with nation, through the mixing of symbols such as the choice of 20 May (also Fretilin's founding day) for one of Timor-Leste's two independence days, and strong similarities between the party and national flags.

With the state also the largest provider of employment and income, it is not surprising to see also a meshing of party and state, and this has occurred through a politicisation of the bureaucracy and harnessing of government resources for party activities. The political cost attached to merging state, party and nation in these ways is that it creates deep

divisions and strong opposition from a range of actors who resent the appropriation of national symbols and exclusion from the state.

Only days before the violence of 28 April, World Bank President, Paul Wolfowitz, visiting Dili, spoke of Timor-Leste leading a group of nine post-conflict countries on almost every one of the Bank's own Post-Conflict Performance Indicators. Whilst this appraisal may reflect the organisation's need for success

stories, it also suggests that the indicators used — public security, disarmament and demobilisation, management of inflation, education, health, budgetary and financial management — might fail to capture the texture of stressors on the political and social fabric.

The reasons given by 591 F-FDTL soldiers (calling themselves 'petitioners') from the western districts who deserted in February and March, and were subsequently dismissed by the F-FDTL Commander Taur Matan Ruak, were significant in that they not only indicated a divided military, but also provided the discursive vehicle for the conflict to transfer itself into the civil domain.

The petitioners claimed they had been subjected to discrimination based on their western/Loromonu (sunset in Tetun) origins by F-FDTL commanders, the majority of whom are easterners or Lorosae ('sunrise'). They claimed this discrimination was framed by a questioning of their commitment to the independence struggle.

Disparagement of westerners' contributions to the struggle by easterners stems from the idea that because the armed resistance maintained a more constant presence in the east, and the worst pro-Indonesian militia groups were based in the west, the western districts were too accommodating of Indonesian occupation. Geography, however, dictates that it was only natural, that the militia would be strongest in the west, closer to the border with Indonesian West Timor and questioning of their commitment to independence is regarded as insulting by many Loromonu people.

Whether the petitioners' allegations of discrimination based on these ideas are objectively 'true', or not, is immaterial. The fact that the allegations resonated beyond the military illustrates how the experience of occupation continues to inform post-independence identities.

The east-west divide was first erroneously reported in the Australian media as 'ethnic', and subsequently almost dismissed as an invention of the media. It is neither. It cannot be mapped onto language, racial or cultural groupings, but rather divides Timor-Leste's fourteen districts into two

regional blocks: the four eastern districts and the ten central and western districts. The distinction is given some superficial meaning through attribution of certain stereotypical character traits to each group.

Many Timorese speak of the Loromonu/Lorosae distinction as a fiction, lacking in substance, cross-cut by marriage and party ties, mobilised only for political ends and subordinate to an essential national unity. Paradoxically, however, observation of people's movements during the worst week of violence in May indicated that it had become an organising principle both for people gravitating toward refuge and those enacting violence. Despite widespread skepticism, talk of a regional divide had evolved to manifest a visible and tragic reality on the ground.

If regional divisions defined the lines of conflict, Dili provided two further ingredients for civil violence. As the capital and largest urban centre, Dili has attracted people from all over the country, particularly since independence. The migration and resettling process has interrupted the continuity of traditional communities, and one response has been the partial replication of the east/west distinction through suburb settlement patterns in Dili.

Secondly, mass street-level violence and intimidation also requires large numbers of young men who can be easily mobilised by appeals to their masculinity, relative powerlessness and disenfranchisement. The lack of opportunity for meaningful participation in the state, coupled with a devaluing of their Indonesian education, maintains a ready source of discontent able to be tapped with explosive effect.

It should also be noted that much of the early arson in Dili was politically orchestrated against both government and opposition figures, and therefore did not neatly fit the east/west paradigm. Revenge attacks in the upward spiral of violence undoubtedly complicated these lines of conflict, which resist attempts to link one regional grouping with a particular political party.

The politics of identity also feeds the enmity between the National Police of Timor-Leste — the PNTL — and the F-FDTL. PNTL authority is undermined by a variety of factors, but primarily it is tainted by a recruitment policy that accommodated former Indonesian police.

The F-FDTL, having evolved out of the Falintil armed resistance, views itself as the long-standing and rightful protector of the nation. Its lack of a meaningful role, the heavy arming of the PNTL and its deployment on the border with Indonesian west Timor, have heightened the institutional rivalry. A concentration of Loromonu in the police force and the distinctly Lorosae character of the F-FDTL (following the petitioners' desertion) facilitated a discursive link between the regional and institutional conflicts.

This conflict reached a deadly climax on 24 May when a gunfight between members of each force ended with F-FDTL soldiers killing ten and seriously wounding thirty PNTL officers at PNTL headquarters in Kaikoli following the disarming of PNTL officers supervised by UNPOL. Naturally, this incident further ratcheted up community mistrust of both security organisations and the government.

Other important actors who feel their roles in the new state do not match their stakes in the nation include former disaffected Falintil veterans, members of the clandestine movement and the Catholic Church. Since independence all of these actors have been disempowered and demonstrated that their rapidly transformed relationships to the state can become sources of insecurity.

Future directions for analysis of the politics of state-building in Timor-Leste, therefore, need to avoid simplistic attacks and reflex defences of parties and leaders, and devote more effort to understanding the nexus between conflict, identity, nation and state. That so many Timor-watchers (myself included) were taken by surprise by the speed with which known divisions deepened, and new ones opened up, suggests that much in the Timorese political landscape remains opaque, if not illegible, to outsiders.

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NOT ONE FOR ROMANTICS, FOX NEWS' BILL O'REILLY WRITES.... 'SHUT-UP'!

'I feel, perhaps I'm being romantic about it, but I feel very confident that good sound honest journalism will prevail in the long term, even though it may not be delivered on destroyed trees.'

Rupert Murdoch in a speech delivered at Machiavelli's Restaurant in Sydney after *The Bulletin* named him Australia's Most Influential Person, 'The Media Report', ABC Radio National, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/mediareport/stories/2006/1673072.htm#transcript>